

Sketch

Volume 41, Number 2

1976

Article 11

Soil Among The Roots

John Arends*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1976 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

Soil Among The Roots

John Arends

Abstract

THE NIGHT advanced, falling heavily on the barns and trees and cars. Ahead, the painted lines of the interstate were locked in our headlights, and the shoulder reflectors marched by in sluggish step. In the other lane, the oncoming cars looked like the pearls of a broken necklace cast on an ebony cloth...

Winner of 1975 Will C. Jumper Award

Soil Among the Roots

by
John Arends
Journalism 3

*“With quiet courage he fights
Back from a world
Alien to inalienable rights.”*

—FOR CHANS—

THE NIGHT advanced, falling heavily on the barns and trees and cars. Ahead, the painted lines of the interstate were locked in our headlights, and the shoulder reflectors marched by in sluggish step. In the other lane, the oncoming cars looked like the pearls of a broken necklace cast on an ebony cloth. Beyond the headlights, the Minnesota farmland seemed buried in the darkness, settled into the earth. An occasional barn light was the only evidence that anything existed outside the strip of highway, and these lights seemed to strain under the blackness, lifting what shadows they could from the night.

Inside the car, static from the radio cracked sporadically over the drone of the engine as Chris tried to tune in a distant station. Giving up, he settled back behind the steering wheel and began eating the last of a dozen donuts we'd bought in St. Paul.

A sign, “Duluth—48 miles,” rose from the darkness and flashed past my window on the right, leaving the headlights empty again. We were ten hours out of Topeka, yet the conversation had compressed them into what seemed like ten minutes. We would be canoeing the Canadian wilderness for two weeks, however, leaving much time for Chris and me to talk, to fill in the gaps which had grown so wide since we were separated five years ago.

It was an old friendship, aged not so much in years as in difficulties shared. And dreams shared: goals that Chris and I had confided in each other without the usual garments of light laughter and jokes about wishful thinking. We took each other seriously, and made certain that when we talked, we talked with each other, not to each other. Chris had made sure of this, very effectively, and quite early into our friendship; ‘Hey Galahad—watch where you put your feet when you get off that high horse of yours. You two just dumped quite a load of shit!’ I did little boasting after that.

That’s how we first got to know each other. During the first year of high school, we were both successful in sports, and it became an inside joke to play down each other’s accomplishments. Of course it’s difficult for a gymnast to be recognized as anything more than a ‘fairy nice fellow’ when his critics are a bunch of high school kids who pride themselves on running seven miles a day for cross-country. Chris was good about it though, and while I knew the pain of his discipline from the two-mile run in gym class, he didn’t let his limited understanding of gymnastics impinge upon his appreciation of movement. ‘How do you make yourself go around the bar like that?’ he’d sometimes ask in amazement.

During the winters of those first two years of high school, we’d both go home after working out, eat dinner, and meet at the ice rink an hour later. It was on one of those nights that I first pinched a girl—I won’t confess where, but it was Chris’s idea that directed my aim. He didn’t stop laughing for ten minutes, kidding me about the red flush of my face that I claimed was from the wind.

It had been fun, that first year and a half.

Twenty miles outside of Duluth we stopped at a Union 76 Truck Plaza for gas and to trade off the driving. I had driven from Topeka to Ames, where we had stopped to pick up my cameras and the maps the canoe outfitter had sent; Chris had been driving since then. The air outside was cool for an August night and felt good when we stopped by the

pumps and got out of the car.

"Fill it with regular, please." I nodded to the attendant, whom we obviously had interrupted in the middle of a nap. He disgustedly pulled at the hose and moved behind the car.

"Did you say fill it?" he asked.

"Yeah. Chris, could you throw away that empty donut box?"

"Sure," he replied. "I'll pay for this tank, since you paid for the one in Ames."

"All right. Let's go inside for a minute and get something to drink."

All truck stops look alike: dull chrome, steel, and glass. Chris and I walked through the doors, past the cash register, and stopped at the pop machine. The only people around were in the cafe area, and the dozen or so that were sitting in there, half of them cooks and waitresses, seemed preoccupied with their cigarettes and coffee. No heads turned as the machine reluctantly dispensed, with a mechanical belch, two cans of Dr. Pepper.

"Jack, do you remember that letter I wrote to you my first summer, right after our sophomore year at Valley High? It was the one where I finally told you the truth about what had been going on that spring, after Judy and I broke up. You know which letter I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Yeah, I remember it," I answered, as I popped the can open and dropped the tab into the machine slot. "Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering if you still have it. You didn't throw it away, did you?"

I said I was sure it was still around somewhere, back home in a shoe box. Even if I had thrown it away, the letter wasn't lost. I could still picture it perfectly, the taped envelope seal, the scratchy, slanted script on a piece of paper that he'd torn out of a spiral notebook. I had received it five summers ago, yet still could recall the feeling I had when I

first read it. I remember being almost distracted by Chris's handwriting, as if I'd rather look at the words, instead of trying to understand their meaning. They said, with the groping honesty of a person turned inside-out, that Chris had spent the last four months in Chicago's Presbyterian-St. Luke hospital, in the mental ward.

"Nine dollars and eighty-seven cents—fifteen gallons," the attendant announced, bringing some of the Minnesota wind through the door with him. Chris handed me his can of pop and dug into his hip pocket for his wallet.

"How much are those harmonicas over there, by the sunglasses?" Chris asked, nodding at a display case by the pop machine.

"Two-fifty."

"I'll take one." Chris pulled some money out of his wallet and gave it to the attendant, whose grease-covered hands returned with some change and the harmonica.

"Since when do you know how to play the ax?" I asked, as we pushed open the doors, heavy against the wind, and walked out to the car.

"The what?"

"The ax—that's what people who play the blues call the harmonica. How come you bought that thing?"

"After listening to you trying to sing all those John Prine songs between Topeka and Ames, I have to return the torture somehow. Maybe with me blowing through this thing, you won't sing off-key so much."

We both smiled, and as I opened the car door, Chris gave me a light poke in the shoulder. The large scar on his forearm, purple and wrinkled in the fluorescent light, caught my eye. I remembered him telling me it was a cigarette burn he'd got in Preys.-St. Luke, while playing a "pain game" with another patient. I started the engine, pulled the headlights on, and moved out of the truck stop. Again, the black of the night, the trees, and the farmland engulfed us, as we left the lighted island and merged with

the interstate. Chris finished his Dr. Pepper and began to test his harmonica. After he struggled for a few minutes with some awkward notes, I interrupted:

"Chris, how long did they censor your mail after you left Preys.-St. Luke and your parents put you in the Menninger Clinic? I remember that first letter I got being taped shut, and a lot of the other ones were badly beaten up."

"They looked at everything I sent, and everything that was sent to me. You know those tape cassette letters we exchanged? They listened to every one of them."

"Even the ones I sent?"

"Yep. They screened everything before I saw it."

"Did you give them permission?" I asked.

"I didn't have any say in the matter. They were very good at telling me that everything the therapists did was for my own good. Reading my mail was supposed to help them 'guide' my therapy. I knew they were thinking I might get a letter from Judy or something that would cause a relapse." His voice was sadly sarcastic.

"Did she ever write you?"

"I haven't heard from her since she broke off everything between us . . . and I broke down."

Chris bowed his head to the harmonica, and began playing a series of soft, solitary notes.

I looked at him, bent over the harmonica, straining on notes that were found, played, and lost. I thought of the talking-letters we had sent, and all of the recorded words we had shared that were now lost. Words about padded cells, group masturbation, shock therapy, and discharge.

Chris stopped playing his harmonica and squinted out the window at the harsh lights of Duluth. As I glanced over at him, the orange haze of the streetlights threw a dark pattern across his face, accenting the deep pockets of his eyes. His face looked longer, and sagged under the shadows of his cheek bones. The lights of the city pressed on his vague profile, falling heavily with shadows on him.

He turned from the window, bent over the harmonica, and began to play again. The notes were louder, and the instrument flashed in the lights.

Again, I interrupted. "You know that book you told me to read, *The Gulag Archipelago*? Well, I got through the first couple of chapters, the ones describing how the Russian police arrest people without warning and ship them off to the prisons. That's all the farther I got. Solzhenitsyn is a good writer, but I couldn't see reading 700 pages of him. Why did you want me to look at it?"

Chris lifted his head and answered, "All I wanted you to get out of that book, Jack, is an idea of how one powerful group of people can completely conquer another group of people and leave them helpless. When the Russians arrest somebody—did you see how quickly and silently the victims were completely stripped of their possessions, of their rights? That's what really reached me when I read that book.

"I saw myself. Because, Jack—nobody realizes it. They say it couldn't happen here. That it's all in Russia. They're wrong. There is a Gulag Archipelago right here, in this country. I know, because I was in it for two years, on one of its islands. The whole system of mental institutions in this country is just like the prison system in Russia. In one night, I was completely stripped of my rights, taken from my bedroom to a cage. I was helpless. Nothing I said, nothing I felt, was of any importance to anybody. I was told I didn't know what I wanted. Think about that. It was so complete, they even told me when I could and when I could not take a shit." Chris's voice rose only slightly as he spoke, but he was intense, accenting his words with staccato hand movements and flourishing his harmonica like a riding staff.

I listened intently, glancing from the streets to Chris, and back to the streets again. I turned the car towards a sign that read, "Tofte, Minn.—61 miles." Chris continued, "Of all the pain, all the therapy I went through—from the shock treatment, the LSD trips, the confinement in QR—"

“What’s QR?” I asked.

“Quiet Room—solitary confinement in a white, padded cell.” He paused a moment, taking a slow, deep breath. “I discovered about a year ago that I had been put in that thing for two months at the beginning of my treatment. I can only remember what seems like a week. The rest is lost.”

I winced, tightening my jaw. I didn’t speak, but looked at Chris. He was staring back at the city, now a cluster of lights huddled on the hills above Lake Superior.

“Of all the things I went through during those two years, one feeling that haunted me the entire time was the most frightening: that was the realization that, besides what little self-dignity I could cling to, I did not have one right as a human being. Nothing. Not one.”

I watched in the mirror as the last of the city lights fell behind a hill. The trees were thick on both sides of the highway, with an occasional clearing on the right, towards the lake. The moon was just above the horizon now, and hung heavy and round. A solitary gull flew in silhouette against the black and silvery water, bouncing with the lift from the staccato beats of its wings.

The car was driving itself now; the highway was empty. I was following Chris’s gaze out towards the lake, the moon, and the bird. The trees blinked by like thoughts, and I struggled to feel Chris’s burden, to touch that pain which seemed so untouchable. I stared at the painted lines on the road, and found myself angry at the people who had painted them. I began to feel hatred inside, formidable and deep inside me. It was a hatred for myself, and for the driver of the oncoming car. Damn Duluth, I thought. And damn St. Paul. Damn the people in Topeka, and goddamn the kids at Valley High. They did it to him. We did it to him.